



X-Plain™

Dilation And Curettage

Reference Summary

Dilation and curettage, or D&C, is a procedure that is used to diagnose and treat a number of health conditions that affect women. D&C is one of the most common gynecological operations. Your doctor may have recommended that you have a dilation and curettage performed.

This reference summary will help you to better understand what dilation and curettage is and the possible diseases that can be treated or diagnosed with it.

Anatomy

The female reproductive organs include:

- the vagina
- the uterus
- the fallopian tubes
- the ovaries

The female reproductive organs are located in the pelvis, between the urinary bladder and the rectum.

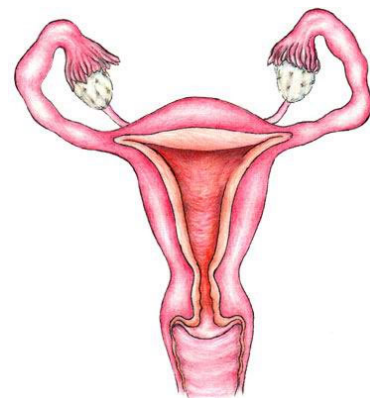
The ovaries have 2 main functions.

- Ovulation, or the release of eggs, needed for reproduction.
- The production of specialized hormones, such as estrogen and progesterone. These hormones regulate ovulation and prepare the inner lining of the uterus in case the woman becomes pregnant.

When an egg is released, it goes down the fallopian tube, where it may be fertilized.

If the egg is not fertilized, the egg and the inner lining of the uterus are discharged to the outside of the body during the menstrual period. The uterus is pear shaped. It measures about 3 inches in length and has 3 layers.

The inner layer of the uterus is called the endometrium. Once a month, if the woman does not get pregnant and the ovaries are functioning correctly, the endometrium is shed to the outside of the body. This is the menstrual period. Menstrual periods are fairly regular; on average, they begin about every 28 days and usually last 4-7 days. As menopause approaches, periods become irregular and eventually stop. Menopause occurs when the ovaries quit producing hormones and releasing eggs. If a pregnancy occurs, the fetus stays in the uterus until it is delivered. The uterus is able to expand greatly. The middle, muscular layer of the uterus creates labor contractions, which cause the baby to be born.



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The outer layer of the uterus is called serosa. The lowest part of the uterus is called the cervix. It opens into the vagina, which opens to the outside of the body between the urethra, the urinary bladder opening, and the rectum. The uterus is held in place with ligaments that help prevent the uterus from slipping down into the vagina.

Indications

A D&C procedure can diagnose or treat a number of different women's health conditions. These conditions may cause heavy or abnormal vaginal bleeding. They could also lead to inability to become pregnant or to carry a pregnancy to term. The following are descriptions of some of the conditions that a dilation and curettage can diagnose or treat. Your doctor can tell you which one may apply to you.

Menstrual bleeding. Too much menstrual bleeding can cause considerable blood loss. Painful cramps and abdominal discomfort may also accompany the menstrual cycle.

Abnormal bleeding. A woman may experience bleeding at a time when it should not happen; this is called abnormal bleeding. Some examples of when abnormal bleeding may occur include:

- during or after menopause
- in between menstrual periods, called "spotting"
- after sexual intercourse, called "post-coital bleeding"

Benign tumors. Fibroid tumors, or polyps, that form in the muscular layer of the uterus can cause too much bleeding. "Benign" means these tumors are not cancerous, but can become quite large, causing cramps, pain, and pressure on nearby organs. Polyps are removed during D&C.

Malignant cancer. If cancer is in the uterus, the lining of the uterus and the cervix may also be

involved. Cancers of the uterus can be cured if diagnosed early.

Adenomyosis. If the endometrium, or inner lining of the uterus, grows inside the middle muscular layer of the uterus, it is called adenomyosis. This results in pain, cramping, and abnormal bleeding.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). Infections of the uterus or the fallopian tubes can extend into the pelvic cavities, resulting in a condition called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, or PID. These infections are usually sexually transmitted. PID may cause a lot of pain and can lead to the inability to have children.

A miscarriage or elective abortion. When a fetus is removed from the uterus for any reason, bleeding may result. A D&C is needed to remove any remaining tissue that could cause infections from the inside of the uterus.

Sometimes a D&C is performed to remove an Intra Uterine Device, or IUD. An IUD is a contraceptive device placed in the uterus.

Women who cannot get pregnant may have a D&C to try to find out why they are unable to get pregnant.

Procedure

The goal of a D&C procedure is to scrape the inside of the uterus using instruments called "curettes." In order to insert the curettes into the uterus through the cervix, the cervix must be opened up, or "dilated." This is why the procedure is called "dilation and curettage." D&C may be performed in a hospital or outpatient clinic.



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The day before the procedure, your gynecologist may put a special substance on your cervix to soften and dilate it. The substance may cause some abdominal discomfort and spasm. Make sure to ask your doctor what kind of pain medication you should use if the pain becomes severe.

D&C can be done with local anesthesia, general anesthesia, or regional anesthesia. Your gynecologist will help decide which one is best for you.

You will be asked to lie down with your legs propped up. Your gynecologist will then gently insert a speculum into the vagina to keep it open. At this point, your gynecologist may swab the cervix before entering the uterus. The swabs taken from the cervix will be sent to a pathologist for testing. This is called a Pap smear test.

A pathologist is a specialized doctor who looks at samples of blood or tissue under a microscope to check for cancer or other abnormalities.

The cervix is then dilated with special instruments, while the uterus is stabilized with an instrument called a “tenaculum.” Next, curettes are inserted into the uterus and the inner lining is scraped. The scrapings are sent to a pathologist for testing. The instruments and speculum are then taken out of the body.

After the procedure is finished, the anesthetic is allowed to wear off and you will be able to go home after you rest awhile in the recovery area. You will not be able to drive yourself and will, therefore, need somebody to drive you home.

Risks & Complications

A D&C procedure is very safe. There are, however, several possible risks and complications. These are very unlikely, but possible. You need to know about them just in case they happen. By being informed, you may be able to help your doctor detect complications early.

The risks and complications include those related to anesthesia and those related to any type of surgery. Risks related to anesthesia include, but are not limited to, heart attacks, strokes, and pneumonia. These risks will be discussed with you in more detail by your anesthesiologist.

Some risks are seen in any type of procedure. These include:

- Infection, in the vagina, uterus, or pelvis.
- Bleeding, either during or after the operation.

Other risks and complications are related specifically to this surgery. Rarely, the wall of the uterus may be damaged or perforated; this could potentially lead to injury of other pelvic structures, such as the intestines, the bladder or the blood vessels and nerves. This could require another operation.

After D&C

You will be able to go home the same day of a D&C procedure, after resting in the recovery area. It is normal to have some bloody drainage from the vagina, including vaginal bleeding and brownish discharge. You will need to use sanitary pads for anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.

You should refrain from the following until you check with your doctor:

- using tampons
- sexual intercourse
- heavy lifting

Dilation and curettage will not change your sexual lifestyle and sensations.

You should call your doctor if you develop any of the following:

- a fever
- foul-smelling vaginal discharge
- increased abdominal pain
- increased bloody discharge
- any other unusual symptoms

Summary

Dilation and curettage is a very safe and successful operation. It can diagnose and sometimes treat serious conditions affecting the female reproductive organs. As you have learned, complications may happen. Knowing about them will help you detect them early if they happen.

With the help of your doctor and the test results from a D&C procedure, you can take care of certain health problems you may be experiencing and continue a long and healthy life!

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